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ABSTRACT

When homeschooling parents discuss public schools, they often draw on their own notions of citizenship, and each parent's view of public schools is also likely influenced by his or her larger view of government's proper role in society. This article reports on a 3-year study designed to seek a better understanding of these issues. The study explored homeschoolers' interactions with broader social institutions, especially public schools, and examined the relationship between parents' homeschooling decisions and their notions of democracy. This article draws on democratic theory to highlight the tensions between the ideals that homeschoolers espouse and the implementation of these ideals in their daily lives. The investigation brought to light several tensions reflective of larger conflicts faced by Americans. In a pluralistic society, it is difficult to arrive at educational policies acceptable to all involved or that fully meet the needs of all students and families. It is often equally difficult for parents to steadfastly match their private decisionmaking to their public vision of schooling. The article explores these and other contradictions in homeschoolers' views of public schools and their actual practices and offers some insights into how inconsistencies surface in the broader discourse surrounding education in America. (Author/WFA)

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Kariane Mari Welner

March 2002

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National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education

Teachers College, Columbia University

Exploring the Democratic Tensions within Parents' Decisions to Homeschool

Kariane Mari Welner

UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

Abstract When homeschooling parents discuss public schools, they often draw on their own notions of citizenship and each parent's view of public schools is also likely influenced by his or her larger view of government's proper role in society. I recently completed a three-year study designed to seek a better understanding of these issues. In particular, I explored homeschoolers' interactions with broader social institutions – especially public schools – and I examined the relationship between parents' homeschooling decisions and their notions of democracy. This investigation brought to light several tensions reflective of larger conflicts faced by Americans. In a pluralistic society it is very difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at educational policies that are acceptable to all involved or that fully meet the needs of all students and families. It is often equally difficult for parents to steadfastly match their private decision-making to their public vision of schooling.

In this article, I draw on democratic theory – and the categories of liberal, communitarian, and deliberative democracy – to highlight the tensions between the ideals that homeschoolers espouse and the implementation of these ideals in their daily lives. Some homeschoolers, notwithstanding their contrary choice for their own children, support a communitarian vision of the public schools. Other homeschooling parents voice a liberal critique of the "indoctrination" of public schooling, yet their children remain subject to their own indoctrination. And still others would support the public schools if those schools taught these parents' vision of morality and truth, but they condemn the schools for teaching contrary metaphysical views. This article explores those contradictions and offers some insights into how these inconsistencies surface in the broader discourse surrounding education in America.

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The Occasional Paper Series of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (NCSPE) is designed to promote dialogue about the many facets of privatization in education. The subject matter of the papers is diverse, including research reviews and original research on vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, and educational management organizations. The papers are grounded in a range of disciplinary and methodological approaches. The views presented in these papers are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NCSPE.

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It is contrary to natural law for the state to usurp the natural authority and responsibility of parents to educate their offspring.... [Government-sponsored schooling] undermines self-government because the basic unit of free peoples is the family. By removing the most important function of the family life the passing on culture the state eviscerates the family. ... This is why in the struggle between the educational interests of the state and the rights of the family, the family must win, or the authority and currency of truth itself is undermined. This is especially so if the basic operating truth of a society is the supreme importance of human liberty.

-- Douglas Dewey, *Remarks at the Inaugural Fordham Foundation Luncheon* (1996)

[Man] is accustomed to rely upon himself alone and to cut himself off from the whole; he has trained himself not to believe in the help of others, in men and in humanity, and only trembles for fear he should lose his money and the privileges that he has won for himself. Everywhere in these days men have ceased to understand that the true security is to be found in social solidarity rather than in isolated individual effort. But this terrible individualism must inevitably have an end, and all will suddenly understand how unnaturally they are separated from one another.

-- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

When homeschooling parents discuss public schools, they often draw on their own notions of citizenship and each parent's view of public schools is also likely influenced by his or her larger view of government's proper role in society. I recently completed a three-year study designed to seek a better understanding of these issues. In particular, I explored homeschoolers' interactions with broader social institutions – especially public schools – and I examined the relationship between parents' homeschooling decisions and their notions of democracy. This investigation brought to light several tensions reflective of larger conflicts faced by Americans. In a pluralistic society it is very difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at educational policies that are acceptable to all involved or that fully meet the needs of all students and families. It is often equally difficult for parents to steadfastly match their private decision-making to their public vision of schooling.

In this article, I draw on democratic theory – and the categories of liberal, communitarian, and deliberative democracy – to highlight the tensions between the ideals that homeschoolers espouse and the implementation of these ideals in their daily lives. Some homeschoolers, notwithstanding their contrary choice for their own children, support a communitarian vision of the public schools. Other homeschooling parents voice a liberal critique of the "indoctrination" of public schooling, yet their children remain subject to their own indoctrination. And still others would support the public schools if those schools taught

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these parents' vision of morality and truth, but they condemn the schools for teaching contrary metaphysical views. This article explores those contradictions and offers some insights into how these inconsistencies surface in the broader discourse surrounding education in America.

Methods

Homeschooling parents do not tend to trust outsiders.[1] For years, homeschooling existed on the edge of legality, with authorities from states and school districts often threatening and sometimes prosecuting these atypical parents (Arons, 1983; Gorder, 1990; McCarthy, 1992; Rakestraw & Rakestraw, 1990). In approaching this study, therefore, I carefully designed a procedure that would lead parents to feel comfortable sitting down with an outsider to discuss the connection between their views of democracy, their thoughts about the purpose of schooling in a democratic society, and the views that led them to their own schooling decisions.

As an entrèe into the broader homeschooling community, I made initial contact through various homeschooling associations and support groups.[2] I then administered background surveys[3] and, based on survey responses, I employed a "purposive sampling" design (see Merriam, 1988), selecting families that represented the widest possible variety of demographics and religious and political ideology. Case study methodology enabled me to engage in a detailed examination of homeschoolers in their unchanged, real-life social and political contexts (Yin, 1989). An embedded case study model allowed me to use parents' democratic and educational philosophies as the primary unit of analysis and each family as a subunit of analysis (see discussion in Yin, 1989).

Through extensive interviews with 26 homeschooling families (often with both parents) in Pennsylvania and Colorado, I explored how they conceive of democracy, the purpose of education, and the potentially conflicting roles of parents and the state in determining the form and substance of education. My interviews consisted of conceptual, open-ended questions about the parents' underlying perceptions and theories regarding democracy and schooling, as well as questions about the implications of their ideas. When I

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1 For a discussion of the sometimes underground nature of homeschooling, please see, for example, Byrne, 1999; McCoy, 1981; Hegener, 1988.

2 Twenty support groups in Pennsylvania and nine in Colorado.

3 Ninety-eight completed surveys were returned to me.

asked these parents about their views of democracy and how to educate children for democracy, I probed into issues such as how they think society should make educational decisions, the potential role of public schools, and what should determine and define parents' and states' rights and obligations. While I interviewed some parents who took a "live and let live," dismissive attitude toward the public schools, the vast majority took a strong, idealized stand either in favor of or against the public schools.

Reconciling the Public with the Private

Many homeschoolers, who I refer to as "civic-minded homeschoolers," support public schools in both theory and practice, notwithstanding their contrary schooling choices for their own children. These homeschooling parents tend to actively support school bonds, to vote for candidates seen as champions of public education, and to rally behind school improvements that they view as educationally sound.

One reform-minded superintendent of a wealthy, suburban district described to me the support he received from such homeschoolers when he pushed for progressive changes in his district's schools, "[W]hen I was in trouble [with an anti-change school board] a couple of [homeschoolers] actually did come to the [school board] meetings to argue in my defense." He went on to add that he valued this "really nice gesture" because, the homeschooling parents were not there to support him in his professional capacity relating to homeschooling, rather they came to "defend" him as the superintendent of the school district. They spoke in support of this superintendent because of his progressive reform ideas, even though those reforms would not affect them directly.

Civic-minded homeschoolers such as these support a strong governmental role in public education. They see public schools as vital societal institutions that must be maintained. As one such parent readily acknowledged, "it's just not possible for everybody to [homeschool]." For this reason alone, these parents reasoned, American society needs public schools. Accordingly, they advocated for these schools' improvement. Moreover, moving beyond this practical focus on the immediate needs of their fellow citizens, these civic-minded homeschoolers also stressed the importance of public schools as an intrinsic good for broader society. They argued that, for the nation's health and betterment, public education "has to be there." They reasoned that the school system plays a vital and central role in American society, contending that without the public schools, communities would

face exponentially growing social and economic problems. A homeschooling father emphasized that, for these reasons, the government simply must ensure an education for all of its citizens:

> I think society has an obligation to provide a baseline of education if the goal is to make society function. Because I think without rules and education and development, it would be anarchy. I mean it would be a total mess. So, if society wants to continually improve and get along and function well together, it has to educate its own people.

Like this father, the civic-minded homeschoolers with whom I spoke stressed the importance of society establishing, supporting, and maintaining institutions that work to benefit all members. Their expressions about the good of public institutions echoed the views of communitarian democratic theorists: that these institutions need to be established to teach and pass on traits important to the community. Communitarianism holds that people, by nature, possess both a political and a social side and that communities should allow for personal formation through societal association (see Aristotle, 335BC; Rousseau, 1762; Sandal, 1982, 1988; and Taylor, 1984). In a communitarian society, people set and pursue communal goals for the sake of the common good, not the good of the individual (Aristotle, 335BC).

A communitarian view of democracy promotes an education that teaches people to know and appreciate the community's culture and institutions. It assumes a shared conception of what is good and works to equip children with the character traits and sense of identity required by this notion (Strike, 1991). Communitarian education promotes the community's social and political institutions with the aim that individuals develop wants and desires consistent with the common culture. Otherwise, people will have goals that they cannot achieve within their society, and the institutions will seem oppressive (Smith, 1997). In this way, communitarian education initiates children into a society's common vision. Yet, while civic-minded homeschoolers embrace the communitarian ideals underlying this theory, they chose to opt their own children out of the common educational experience they support.

This focus on the importance of universal institutions is readily apparent in the following statement by a homeschooling mother, whose husband sat nearby nodding in strong agreement: "[J]ust because I haven't chosen [to send my children to public school], I think it would be detrimental to my local society for me not to try to help facilitate [the learning of] those other children." Another mother echoed this sentiment when she

discussed the importance of thinking about all of the children a particular educational policy may affect, not only one's own,

> [I]f your child has a particular need, you want to see that met. So you should be as open to dealing with other children and their needs.... [I]t's...good that other children get their needs met because then they're going to do better in school, they're going to be happier in school. Your children are...in those classes with those other children.

This group of homeschooling parents empathetically and repeatedly expressed the importance of ensuring that, as a society, we meet the needs of all our members.

This notion of thinking about how the consequences of one's actions might affect others stands in contrast to the classical liberal idea, expressed by many autonomy-minded homeschoolers (discussed in the following section of this article), of each person making choices based solely upon his or her own interests. Liberals advocate that personal prerogative constitutes the basis of a democratic society. In doing so, they emphasize familial decision-making over majority wishes. For them, the concept of democratic schooling is largely divorced from larger questions about how individuals' choices impact broader civil society.

Because these civic-minded homeschoolers perceive a need to care about (and for) the larger community, they express gratitude that the government takes on its educational role. "[I]t's important," explained one homeschooler, for the state "to make sure ... that people are receiving an education." Another homeschooling mother emphasized, "We're called to care for our neighbors." Therefore, she argued, it is important to support the schools through voting for funding increases and other educational ballot measures.

Utilitarian rationales often complemented the civic-minded view. As expressed by one father: "[I]t's a good thing for the state to want its citizens educated, mainly because who would fill the jobs without education? Who would fill the government without education? In order for the state to run, it needs educated citizens." Because our society needs educated citizens in order to function in an orderly manner, these civic-minded homeschoolers felt that it served the government's (as well as society's) best interest to promote and maintain a public education system.

Others among these civic-minded homeschoolers adopted a deficit view reminiscent of President Johnson's New Society programs. One mother who fell into this latter category commented to me that, even though she did not think schools, in their present state, made

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for ideal learning situations, for those kids whose parents did not (or could not) provide a learning-rich environment, these schools provided a necessary and worthwhile resource.

> If [the home]'s not going to be a kind environment with an educational focus, you can see there'll be kids coming [to school] where it would be a…lifesaver for them. … And if you don't see that [kind of learning going on] around you, if you're … going to be watching TV 24 hours a day or whatever, …you're going to grow up illiterate and you're not going to be prepared for your life. … [S]o I think it actually is important to have public schooling.

For some children, these parents contended, schools provided the best, or the only decent, learning environment.

But non-utilitarian views were also prominent. Pointing to education's role in the functioning of a democracy, a mother opined that only a coercive and totalitarian government would fail to provide a means of teaching its citizens: "I would consider [providing an education] being responsible in terms of governing people. You can't govern people who can't read unless you don't want them to read for other reasons…. [Education]'s your responsibility if you're going to lead people." This idea, that in order to maintain a free and democratic society a leader must ensure the education of their electorate, resonated in the comments of many of these families.

Issues of inequality and fairness were also commonly raised as important motivations for public education. As one parent explained, "some parents just don't have the means or the education to be able to [homeschool] their kids. Financially…some people may not have the means to send [their children] to private schooling."

In spite of this support, however, these civic-minded homeschoolers maintained that they provided a better education for their children than their children would receive in a public school, but they still ardently supported public schools. In fact, typical of parents in this group, the above-quoted mother stated that she may enroll her kids back in the public schools, should she, her husband, or her children decide that homeschooling no longer meets their needs. Moreover, they spoke with sorrow about the political pressures to decrease funding to, or even dismantle, the public school system. They sadly acknowledged the fact that only the financially secure really experienced a full range of choices about the type of education their children could receive. Commenting along this vein, an African-American mother referred to homeschooling as "the poor man's private school." These civic-minded homeschoolers nevertheless acknowledged that, although some exceptions

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exist, homeschooling does not serve as a truly viable option for resource-poor members of society. This understanding fueled their commitment to public education.

Speaking of his desire to bring his "60's values" to fruition in larger society, a homeschooling father explained his commitment to the public schools as part of his duty as a citizen and a human to help provide for those less fortunate.

> [F]or whatever reason, we do have "haves" and "have-nots." And I do believe that it is to the benefit of the haves to facilitate the improvement of life for the have-nots. Or at least to make the effort.... I do believe that those of us that have the privileges of wealth or ability and knowledge and the benefits of education, and not schooling necessarily, but of education, who think more and whose decision making is more cerebral than visceral, that it is in our best interest, as well as a value that I hold dear, to make that available to people who don't otherwise have access to it.

Similarly, and less condescendingly, a mother emphasized that when making decisions, we must think about the consequences not only for ourselves, but also for those around us: "I think we can't be self-centered and just think about ourselves. We live in a world, we live in a society, we live on a street. We have obligations to relate to each other and to relate to each other in a helpful...way."

In saying this, the homeschooling mother hinted at the perspective of deliberative democracy scholars, who believe that we should actively engage all stakeholders in the decision-making process, making sure that outcomes meet the needs of everyone whom the decision might impact. Deliberative democracy tries to take account of the complexity of pluralism (see Benhabib, 1996; Phillips, 1996; Smith, 1997). It depends upon all people affected by a decision having an equal say in its outcome (see Benhabib, 1994, 1996; Cohen, 1989; Gutmann, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996).

This concern for supporting institutions that benefit broader society, whether or not the specific individual speaking would benefit directly, was voiced repeatedly by the civic-minded homeschoolers I interviewed. The deliberative democratic philosophy also was apparent in the comments offered by a homeschooling father's description of the ideal governmental role, which he characterized as mediating between the diverse desires of its members and coming to a solution acceptable to all parties:

> It says in the preamble to the Constitution that one of the roles of government is to provide for the common good. For me, this means two things: government holds the communal vision of what we all want for all of us, lest any part of us gets too caught up in our own immediate desires; and it means that we share a belief in synergy and the abundance mentality. ... Government would support

> the collaborative spirit, not the competitive one. It would manage its own affairs, and facilitate those of others, with a mindset that says, "OK, you want this, he wants that...let's figure out a way that both parties can get what they want. Until we do, nobody gets any of whatever we're competing for." In the later stage, government is like the collective conscience. It oversees the whole country, keeps its eye on the long view and, as I said earlier, holds the vision of the people so that we can continuously check our behavior against our goal to make sure that we're in alignment.

This father believed that society should apply these same principles to education. The government should oversee, to make sure that people do not push merely for their own interests but the interests of all stakeholders, and then implement the resulting system to the good of all society. Part of this, he asserted, includes public schools.

Bringing these deliberative democratic ideals to fruition, however, proves more difficult in practice than in theory. American history offers many examples of the inadequacy of merely creating institutionalized procedures and bare, *de jure* conditions of equality. Because of pre-existing inequalities in societal power relations, deliberative democracy's foundational assumption of equality among political participants tends to crumble (Young, 1990). Even though many Americans strive for these ideals, in application the process is too often characterized by prejudice and excessive self-interest. (See Howe, 1997, for a discussion of deliberative democracy as applied to schooling.)

Both communitarian democracy and deliberative democracy share a common public vision that embraces institutions such as public schools. Communitarians see the community binding citizens together for the sake of their development and for the sake of the common good (Aristotle, 1941). Although each person begins with uniquely individual circumstances and identity, people and families make decisions based on what is best for the community. Similarly deliberative democracy views reasoned deliberation among free and equal citizens – coming to a mutual decision as to the direction the community should go – as the necessary way to make collective decisions (see Benhabib, 1994; 1996; Cohen, 1989; Gutmann, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Civic-minded homeschooling parents, as seen above, voice the community-consciousness element of these theories.

However, while civic-minded homeschoolers support the ideal of community schools, communitarian democracy recognizes nothing, especially education, as beyond the control of the state. A society's collective idea of what constitutes the common good provides the basis for community life, schooling, and the state. In its pure form, this view does not allow for individuals to choose their own "good" or to use their choices to form

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who they will become. And in a deliberative democracy, the community may decide that such individualist measures are not in the community's best interest. Therefore, among other things, the choice to school at home would probably not exist in a society governed by either of these democratic philosophies.

While civic-minded homeschoolers express the importance of public schools and government involvement in education, they want their children to experience something different (and, in their estimation, better) than what the public schools presently provide. The civic-minded homeschoolers I interviewed were therefore confronted with two interconnected tensions. The first tension is the one outlined above: they choose to educate their own children outside of this system established and supported by the community – a system they champion. The second tension pitted their desire to send their children to public schools against their belief that the practices and quality of those same public schools were far below and/or far different from their own strongly held ideas about education.

For these parents, the homeschooling decision was simply compartmentalized separately from their support for public schools. As one mother explained, "Our decision is an individual decision. It's not a decision to change the world or change the system." Her husband fervently agreed. While they both valued the public schools, he said, their own children's future came before the public institution. They reasoned that their personal homeschooling decision would not work to change what they saw as the shortcomings of public schools – which they actively tried to change through direct political involvement.

For these and other civic-minded parents, homeschooling combined with active support of public schools provided the most satisfying resolution of these tensions. As a short-term solution, they provided the sort of education that they wanted for their own children; as a long-term solution, they advocated for a quality education for all children. Civic-minded homeschoolers generally express very strong and considered opinions about what constitutes an ideal education and what characterizes the best type of educational environment. As a result of these deep convictions, they desire a better learning environment for their own children and support the construction of a better learning environment for all children. Their concerns for education and for children underpin their decision to homeschool and their support for public education. Interestingly, a similar argument can be made concerning homeschoolers who want to eliminate all public schools, since many such parents see public education as impairing societal liberty. It is to this second group that I

now turn.

Autonomy-minded Homeschoolers: Rejecting One Form of Indoctrination But Choosing Another

The civic-minded homeschoolers described above challenge the stereotype of homeschoolers as determined to withdraw from broader society. In contrast, the following discussion of autonomy-minded homeschoolers – parents who want to dismantle the United States' system of public education – may feed into this stereotype. But they should not. The autonomy-minded homeschoolers discussed below have simply adopted a philosophy that echoes the liberal[4] position eschewing government involvement in education.[5] Their focus is on the governmental role rather than societal participation.

Liberalism dictates that all authority, including a state-run educational system, requires justification. People "own" themselves and consequently have the right to exercise self-determination with regard to their lives, learning, and labor (Locke, 1690). They voluntarily join together and have "rights and a conception of their lives prior to and independently of the ministrations of the state" (Strike, 1991, p. 430). Accordingly, liberals hold that the state must remain neutral in its conception of what constitutes "the good" so that people can pursue their own notions. A liberal view of democracy promotes an education that gives individuals the opportunity to explore and choose among a wide range of goods and life-styles. Autonomy-minded homeschoolers claim that public schools do not (or can not) leave open these possibilities. Therefore, homeschooling serves as the means for all parents to pursue their particular vision of "the good."

Liberals also contend that personal prerogative constitutes the basis of a democratic society. Following this line of thinking, a prominent segment of homeschooling proponents loudly trumpets the importance of unfettered individual choice in education (e.g., Richman, 1995). In doing so, they emphasize familial decision-making over majority wishes. For them, the concept of democratic schooling is largely divorced from larger questions about how

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[4] Throughout this article, I use the term "liberal" in this classical sense. I do not employ the popular meaning associated with those on the leftwing of the political spectrum.

[5] Many homeschooling and voucher advocates express this viewpoint (see Friedman, 1962; Richman, 1995; see also Chubb & Moe, 1990, and Coons & Sugarman, 1978, for arguments in favor of vouchers grounded in critiques of public school effectiveness). It should be noted, however, that a number of the anti-government homeschoolers decry vouchers for the same reasons they do not like the public schools – they see vouchers as yet another means of government control and intervention.

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individuals' choices impact broader society.[6] That is, they have little concern about how parents' homeschooling decisions might improve, damage, or otherwise effect institutional education.[7]

Ultimately, the opposition of autonomy-minded homeschoolers to state-run education follows the teachings of liberals such as Mill (1860), who feared that such schooling might indoctrinate students with an official viewpoint. Liberalism often finds its expression in the idea that state authority should be limited (Mill, 1860) or that individuals have rights against the state (Locke, 1690). The state exists only to protect rights and property, acting as a fair arbitrator between parties by relying on principles of universality and neutrality. Therefore, as Strike (1991) notes, liberalism faces the problem of finding a way to separate life into a public sphere, where the state can exercise authority, and a private sphere, where the state has no rights. For example, liberals would oppose state-mandated educational curricula and standards – reasoning that through the implementation of such, the state oversteps its bounds and enters the private sphere. Determined to maintain this public/private distinction, liberals tend to be wary of the state's power to expand beyond its service as the protector of citizens' liberties and become a threat to those same liberties. Consequently, they seek to hold the state accountable through a balance of power.

The public/private distinction purportedly guarantees individual freedom by restricting political discourse to issues of common concern. Liberals dislike having too many things in the public sphere (e.g., a monopolistic educational system), because they fear that these institutions will encroach on distinct conceptions of the good life and accompanying virtues. Essentially, they are wary of the assimilating tendencies these institutions may bring about. In order to guard against this, they seek to protect value- and identity-pluralism by keeping these decisions within the private sphere (see Strike, 1991).

Simply put, the liberal democracy championed by the autonomy-minded homeschoolers I spoke with revolves around a commitment to human freedom and to people's fundamental equality. Liberalism assumes the existence of value-pluralism as well as differences among people's goals, agendas, and means of bringing these various values to fruition. The philosophy is characterized by a desire to protect the freedom of individual

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[6] See Kenway, Bigum, & Fitzclarence, 1993, and Fine, 1993, for a discussion of a similar ideology among other choice advocates.

[7] Compare this to the thesis of Chubb and Moe (1990), who argue that pressures from an openly competitive system financed by the state would drive improvement in all schools.

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citizens from the state and from the tyranny of the majority. Citizens, liberals believe, should be free to pursue their individual views of "the good life." This includes the ability to make independent decisions about the education of their children. (See Ackerman, 1980; Dworkin, 1984; Locke, 1960; Rawls, 1971; and Strike, 1991).

Yet, many autonomy-minded homeschoolers cannot find complete comfort within the theory of liberalism since they do not free their children from all indoctrination. They willingly, even zealously, indoctrinate their children with their own beliefs and invariably with the beliefs of their church.[8] Thus, just as civic-minded homeschoolers ultimately made personal choices to ensure a given type and quality of education for their own children, these autonomy-minded homeschoolers compromised their larger vision of society in favor of their strongly held beliefs about their children's values, behaviors, and politics.

For instance, a devout Christian homeschooling mother, worried about the future godliness of her children, argued that public schools would teach things contrary to that goal:

> [In] the public school system, they train these girls to go out and get a career. That's more important than your family. And I think, in the Bible, God's perfect will is for a wife to be home with her family. And, not that she shouldn't be smart or know how to do things, but she shouldn't [have that as her goal].

By placing a career-minded education above her daughter's Christian character, the public schools became unpalatable to this mother. The school's teachings and goals for her daughter, this mother expressed, were very different from her own.

Another mother argued that as schools become more hostile to religious beliefs, more people will realize the schools' anti-God agenda and withdraw their children, thus leading to the schools' demise. These parents, she reasoned, would pursue alternatives such as homeschooling: "The more the public schools claim freedom from religion and restrict teachers, parents, and students, the more people will seek another option. The more politically correct the schools become, the more homeschooling numbers will rise."

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8 Although most autonomy-minded homeschoolers I talked with held quite strong religious views, not all homeschoolers who think the public schools should be dismantled are of a religous ilk. Some follow the libertarian line of thinking that any government involvement is unnecessary and dangerous to freedom, while others simply think market forces would bring about more efficient and better schools than a governmentally-run system. While this particular section focuses on religious, autonomy minded homeschoolers, it should not be taken as an indication that all autonomy-minded homeschoolers are religious. Other types of autonomy-minded homeschoolers, e.g., those with concerns about political or other types of indoctrination, are discussed below.

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The fear and concern expressed by these parents about the teaching of antithetical values in public schools mirrors in many ways the critique articulated by classical liberal democratic theorists. At the same time, these parents were actively involved in teaching their children their own beliefs. Bible study often constituted a regular part of their day and, along with prayer, provided a foundation for family life. At least once a week – and often several days a week – these families attended church. Clearly these parents had a specific idea of the "good" that they were trying to instill in their children. And they also had an excellent reason: these parents held the conviction that through instilling these religious beliefs in their children, they were saving their children from eternal damnation. These parents were ardently outspoken against some forms of indoctrinating their children, but took their own indoctrinative lessons as a given.

This points to an unavoidable dilemma faced by public schools. Although many teachers and schools work hard to accommodate students' religious beliefs, such accommodation can only go so far. In addition to constitutional limitations, schools are faced with the logical limitation that accommodations favoring one set of beliefs will invariably conflict with another set of beliefs. Acknowledging this dilemma, however, does little to resolve it, and many of the autonomy-minded homeschoolers I spoke with found plenty of specific examples of shortcomings in the basic teaching of values. A father echoed the opinions of many of these dissatisfied parents when he complained that the value system taught by public schools "was simply this, and [my son] could articulate it at the time: If you can get away with it, it's not wrong." These parents clearly viewed the schools as threats to their children's faith and principles.

Moreover, autonomy-minded homeschoolers' fears of indoctrination went beyond what public schools taught (or did not teach) on religious topics. Decrying the undermining of conservative values by what he considered left-wing forces within the public schools, a father told me, "When you come down to politics, kids going to public schools today, they're being branded and stamped Democrats." He went on to say that schools forced teachers to tow this party line and made sure they did not critically analyze the leftist agenda:

> [If a teacher] start[ed] getting into [critical thinking, she] can be pulled down to the principal's office for a little bit of discussion about being a team player. "We're not going to get into critical thinking, we just want the kids to learn the curriculum. If they can learn the curriculum, we'll be satisfied. So let's not get too far afield." Well, the curriculum is decidedly one-sided on the political spectrum.

He and other autonomy-minded homeschoolers opined that leftist political views characterized and controlled the public schools, and this fear of political indoctrination strongly influenced their homeschooling decisions.

One father, frustrated by the fact that "people" often characterize homeschoolers as indoctrinators of their children, spun this accusation back to the schools:

> [T]hey're accusing us of brainwashing our kids. And saying, "... we don't do brainwashing in the schools. We do moral relativism. We're amoral. Okay? We're not teaching them any one morality. We're teaching all of them." [The schools] are not teaching all of it at all. They're not. They're teaching a very leftist, non-religious morality. [I]t's just incredible. [I]t's far more narrow than even [Fundamentalism]. It really is. ... And it's so nice and couched and phrased and all that stuff. It's scary.

He argued the schools used their unique position – a captive audience, the ability to set the curriculum, and some authority over children – to indoctrinate America's youth into thinking in certain ways and holding particular values. He saw this as hypocritical, unacceptable, and clearly beyond the role of schools.

These concerns over indoctrination and the notion that public schools have an underlying agenda also surface in books and articles read by, and trumpeted throughout, this portion of the homeschooling community. In his book, *Separating School & State: How to Liberate America's Families*, Sheldon Richman encourages families to consider home- or private-schooling because he perceives the public schools as socialist, holding values that oppose the ideals of a democratic society. Richman argues that a non-liberal democracy is not really a democracy at all.[9] A homeschooling parent I interviewed echoed Richman's sentiment:

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9 Although Richman's organization is supported by some homeschoolers, it exists largely outside of the broader homeschooling movement. Some prominent homeschooling organizations, however, also expound messages that foster a similar anti-public-school sentiment. For instance, leaders of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) make similar claims. HSLDA is an advocacy organization established to "defend and advance the constitutional right of parents to direct the education of their children and to protect family freedoms" (http://www.hslda.org/hslda/). They provide their thousands of members with legal consultation as well as pro-actively advocate homeschooling on Capital Hill, in state legislatures, and with the media. While the HSLDA does not exclude from membership those who hold non-Christian beliefs, it is an overtly Christian establishment with an agenda dedicated to supporting the rights and duties of families as commanded by Biblical mandate.

Michael Farris, president and founder of HSLDA, and Scott Woodruff, HSLDA attorney, state that it is "a potential or actual conflict of interest for the government to control education" and that "the extent of the conflict increases in direct proportion to the degree of governmental, and especially federal, control." Based on its independence from government control, Farris and Woodruff conclude that homeschooling is, "[U]niquely situated to foster the continuation of our rich and honorable tradition of civil opposition, preserving the things we value most in a free society and eliminating the things that threaten the foundation of liberty" (1999, p. 35). In addition, Christopher Klicka, Senior Counsel of HSLDA and Executive Director of The National Center for

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> There are some socialist [aspects to public schools], I'll prove it to you. The teachers don't have individual contracts. They're unionized. And unions are socialist. Plain and simple. You don't get paid for how good you are, you get paid for how long you've been there.... It's socialist.

These homeschoolers repeatedly underscored their fear and distrust of the public school system by invoking the idea of socialism. Further, they argued that the public schools forced these "socialist" values on the unsuspecting students who made use of their services. As firm believers in capitalism, many of these parents touted the idea that the market will provide what society needs, including charity for those who cannot afford to educate their children.[10]

While Richman and autonomy-minded homeschoolers offer a classical liberal critique of government involvement in American public schooling, other proponents of liberal democracy cringe at the idea of giving parents a monopolistic role in forming the values and beliefs of their children.[11] Children, they argue, require rearing that respects their freedom ultimately to choose their own conception of a good life and should therefore not be taught unconditionally to accept their parents' views (see Bilow, 1990). These liberals hold that children should be taught from a more neutral curriculum that emphasizes the individual freedoms inherent in liberalism. From this perspective, even the otherwise-problematic state-run education has the benefit of keeping children from being overly influenced by the opinions of their own families.

The parents in my study, in contrast, focused on aspects of liberal philosophy wherein the overwhelming concern is the indoctrination of an official viewpoint. These parents idealized the fact that they and other homeschooling parents autonomously choose the content and form of their children's schooling. Because these choices depend solely on

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Home Education (the lobbying and research branch of HSLDA) published a book entitled *The Right Choice: The Incredible Failure of Public Education and the Rising Hope of Home Schooling*, that further decries public schools. Other books and articles popular in this segment of the homeschooling community echo a similar sentiment (see, for example, Blumenfeld, 1985; Landis, 1995; Lehman, 1997).

[10] Organizations such as the Separation of School and State Alliance have advocated and popularized these views – particularly the belief that the government should not, on any level, be involved with education. This Alliance is a prominent organization dedicated to abolishing government-run schools. (For more information, please see their website at: http://www.sepschool.org/) Other organizations that uphold and propagate these views include a Christian organization called "Exodus 2000," a project whose stated purpose is "to trump the insidious anti-academic, pro-social control policies of Goals 2000 with the only option available to today's families: the rapid withdrawal of their children and grandchildren from a corrupt public school system" (http://www.exodus2000.org/overview.htm) (For more information on Exodus 2000 see Caldwell, 1999; McCain, 1999; and the Exodus 2000 Project web page) and a similar movement, called Rescue 2010 – run by the Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) – which touts "helping parents rescue their children from public schools to private Christian schools and home schools" as their primary mission (http://www.nace-cee.org/).

[11] For further discussion, see Aiken & La Follette, 1980; Gutmann, 1980; Wringe, 1981.

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individual parents' values and desires, a great diversity of opinions and beliefs is provided to the expanse of homeschooled children.

Moreover, the homeschoolers who expressed liberal ideals viewed this discrepancy as a non-issue. Their vision of democracy includes their freedom to raise their children as they see fit, not their children's freedom to be raised as the child may choose. Public schools, they argued, had too much influence on children's thinking – stifling diversity of thought and drowning out "the truth." They accused political powers within our society of having an agenda that was "filtering down into the public schools." Accordingly, while autonomy-minded homeschoolers repeatedly noted their worries about indoctrination by the government, they expressed no comparable concerns regarding parents. Instead, these homeschoolers voiced a strong desire to teach their children what they, the parents, thought was true – religious, political, and otherwise.

Metaphysical Elements: Favoring the Teaching of One's Own Beliefs

In the convictions of autonomy-minded homeschoolers and civic-minded homeschoolers there exists a tension between wanting their own beliefs (especially spiritual) taught and upheld and yet not wanting the same for others. This view conflicts with the pure forms of both liberal and communitarian democratic theory.

Autonomy-minded homeschoolers reject the moral relativism of liberal democratic theory

As discussed in the indoctrination section above, many homeschoolers who hold a liberal view of democracy decry the "official viewpoint" taught in public schools. Yet, many of them would not have the same problem with these schools if the "official viewpoint" taught was more closely in line with their own beliefs and convictions. Liberalism as a theory does not allow for such distinctions. As noted earlier, classic liberals fear indoctrination of all kinds – it does not allow for greater valuing of what any given set of parents considers "the truth." Therefore, although autonomy-minded homeschoolers express views that closely mirror those espoused by liberal political theorists, liberalism falls short of explaining the full array of beliefs of a devoutly religious subset of autonomy-minded homeschoolers – particularly their rejection of what they call "moral relativism."

One father, a former pastor of a conservative Christian church, stated his conviction that the public schools had blatant anti-Christian leanings and, accordingly, taught his children "wrong" information. He wanted nothing to do with the public schools:

> [Don't] tell me I have got to go into a government run school that's being run by people who are going towards amoralism or, not quite as bad, moral relativism. [Public schools] are more than happy to invite a Muslim in to teach about Islam and ... a Native American to teach about Native American religion....
> [B]ut...there's no way in the world they'll let me as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to get up there and explain [Christianity]. No, no, don't force me to put my children into a system like that. Absolutely no.

He argued that the government had no right to teach his children about metaphysical truth.[12] He contended that schools had the aim of secularizing society, which he saw as far beyond the ideal role of schools and especially of the government.

Although classical liberals would fully agree that the role of schools should not be to champion one religion over another, they would disagree with the details and motivation of this father's complaint. Classical liberalism is ametaphysical, meaning that it does not involve itself with metaphysical issues – thus staking out a position that this father would likely disparagingly define as moral relativism. An education consistent with the tenets of classic liberalism would focus on creating citizens dedicated to justice and to acting justly (Strike, 1991), but it would not promote the religious convictions this father held as The Truth.

Because many autonomy-minded homeschoolers see the world through a powerful religious, usually evangelical Christian, lens, they could not embrace this crucial tenet of liberal democratic theory. For them, indoctrination was wrong because of the particulars of the indoctrination. Consider the following statement from the earlier-mentioned anti-union homeschooling father, who is clearly more focused on the content of teachers' messages than on the indoctrinative elements:

> I would say that [homeschoolers] consider [democratic citizenship] far more important than [do] schools. Again, because you've got unionized teachers. ... [T]hey'll teach union, union, union. ... [T]hat's not necessarily democracy.... So when you talk about democratic citizenship, ...[without] homeschooling, I would contend that you'll be starting to lose your democracy.

While liberal theorists would support the emphasis this father placed on the importance of dissent, they would not share his specific concerns about unions. Moreover, they would

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[12] While most autonomy-minded homeschoolers spoke in terms of religious truth, the broader phrase, *metaphysical truth*, referring to any teaching that concerns the nature of ultimate reality, more fully encompasses these parents' concerns.

object just as strongly if the teachers indoctrinated an anti-union message. So, although these autonomy-minded homeschoolers co-opted the anti-indoctrination rhetoric of classical liberal theorists, they could not take these positions to their logical and (for them) distasteful conclusions.

Civic-minded homeschoolers' own value pluralism undermines their implementation of communitarian democratic theory

Many of the civic-minded homeschoolers who I interviewed discussed the disjuncture between their educational ideals and public schools' teachings. These concerns ranged from objections to the lack of morality included in instruction to objections to the standardized testing that they saw as driving schools' curricula.

Voicing the former concern, an evangelical Christian mother complained to me about the values, clearly contrary to her own, that she believed the public schools promoted:

> I didn't like [that the schools] teach [children] about sexual education.... I don't think any child needs to know what we do when we're married before they're getting ready to get married.... [W]hy tempt before it's time? ... I want [my daughter] to know that there [are] absolutes. ... I don't want her to be out there lost. Because that's where our society is – lost! They don't know where they're going. They don't know what to judge by. ... How can you run a society [like that]? I don't think this experiment has ever been tried before. Maybe some at the tail end of Rome, and Rome fell.

As a widow, this mother understood that not everyone can homeschool their children and that American society relies upon the public schools to ensure the continued availability of educational access for all children. However, she also contended that the schools needed to change in order to ensure America's moral and physical survival.

Based on this critique, this mother advocated for society-wide institutions that would promote and reflect her particular values. She spoke about the founding of our country with great yearning, offering a somewhat nostalgic, folk view of America's inception that hearkened to a time in which all Americans supposedly shared a common set of "Christian" values and culture. In essence, this mother wanted a communitarian democracy with her Christian values at the core. Of course, other parents, including other homeschoolers, advocate the teaching of very different values.

For instance, a homeschooling father expressed a similar view about dissatisfaction with schools' pedagogy. In his view, however, the content of what schools teach was not the issue. Rather, he objected to how they teach: "It's the process of schooling that is

problematic, not the quality of the school, meaning instruction. It's the competitiveness…." He explained his concern that schools encouraged competition over cooperation and that they portrayed learning as a competitive accomplishment. He wanted schools to present learning as a lifelong love that could lead to personal and societal growth.

Along these same lines, a civic-minded mother, similarly disenchanted with the public schools' competition and their failure to develop children's interest in learning, spoke with me about her search for a progressive school for her son. She and her husband visited the local public school as well as all the private schools in the area. The local public school was, she expressed, very traditional and restrictive. She also offered a harsh critique of a local private school that billed itself as very progressive and child-centered and, in fact, stands as a model nationwide as an example of a good alternative school. She saw this school's version of progressive education as a façade and ultimately concluded that none of her local schools provided the kind of education that she and her husband wanted for their child: "[W]e really considered [the self-declared alternative school]. But then it became apparent… it was just basically like all of the other schools. It just sort of has this kind of gloss of being progressive. It's not really progressive." After putting much time and energy into examining their various schooling options, the family finally decided that the only way to ensure a truly progressive education for their son would be to provide it themselves. The type of education valued and offered by her community did not meet the needs of this mother because she had a very different view of the ideal education. While she supported public educational institutions, she refused to utilize them unless they conformed with her strongly held pedagogical views.

A corollary to this progressive objection to institutional education was voiced by a mother who feared that her son would be harmed by what she perceived to the stifling uniformity within schools' expectations. "I can't really picture sending him [to school] because I can't picture compromising who he really…is," she said. She worried that the school would impose habits or character traits on her son in order for him to succeed. In addition, although her local public schools were ranked among the best in Pennsylvania, she identified structures in those schools that brought back unpleasant memories of her own public school experience.

> I just feel like I wasted so much of my own energy [while I was in school] being nervous all the time…. [V]ery early on, my first memory of reading is in first grade, realizing that I was in the slow group with the big red book and some of

> my friends had their own books at their desks. And that was first grade. And I very vividly remember that. And I don't want that for him.

Although she ultimately did well, this mother's education left her feeling stressed and defeated, and she did not want the same thing for her son.

Another part of the progressive critique offered by some of these civic-minded homeschoolers focused on standards-based reforms. Several parents in my study mentioned the critiques of these policies published by education reformer Alfie Kohn (1999).[13] These parents viewed with disdain curricula not tailored to the individual needs of students. They mourned these trends, particularly the emphasis on standardized tests, contending that already deficient public schools are now moving further in the wrong direction. One such parent condemned the lack of freedom given to teachers to instruct students as the teachers felt would best serve them: "Teachers have to meet so many requirements that they don't have enough freedom to open up the classroom to just spending a day discussing things." This mother further complained that large class size, combined with the rules and standards placed on classroom teaching, effectively preclude teachers from providing students with instruction catered to their individual needs and learning styles.

> [T]he teacher's got twenty-some-odd kids that she's got to get to do a certain task. She doesn't have time to sit down with each child and say, "You learn best musically so why don't we do this, this and this. And you learn best analytically, so we should go in this direction." She's got to stand up and say, "This is the direction you head in. And this is how you get started…. And if you happen to grasp it, that's great. And if you don't, I don't know what to say."

This mother turned to homeschooling to ensure that she could meet the individualized learning needs of her two children after her daughter's kindergarten teacher failed to meet her daughter's needs in a busy, overcrowded classroom.

Another mother empathized the undue pressures put on teachers by administrators who demand higher test scores. What followed from such mandates constituted, she maintained, a "complete waste of time."

> So then [the teacher has] got to teach the kids how to take this stupid test, so they spend a couple weeks doing that…. And, so what? [The standardized tests] meant the teachers were really good at teaching the children how to take the test? What is that an indicator of? Does that mean that children are happy and well-adjusted? …[No,] it means that they all remembered to use their number two pencils ….

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13 In addition to *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* they mentioned *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* and *No Contest: The Case Against Competition.*

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The movement toward curricula driven by standardized tests left this mother with the conviction that current political concerns forced schools down the wrong path.

In spite of the strong support for the institution of public schools found among these civic-minded homeschoolers, they held a diverse range of views about how the schools should change. Accordingly, even among this small group of parents, the public schools could not meet the variety of expressed needs. For example, the widowed mother who voiced displeasure with the non-"Christian" nature of the public school curriculum wanted her values at the core of the school system. She desired a communitarian society where all people and institutions upheld her particular heartfelt convictions – beliefs starkly at odds with those of many other homeschoolers I spoke with. Conflicts among beliefs would, of course, increase exponentially were one to also consider the much broader range of parents served, and potentially served, by the public schools. Determining the guiding principals for a communitarian society proves nearly impossible within a diverse population. Choosing from among the different visions of the "good" quickly devolves into arguments between various members asserting their opposing positions. In the process, the community vision becomes lost or mired.

This points to a core problem with applying a communitarian model of education to a pluralistic society: communitarianism assumes a shared conception of the good and works to equip children with the character traits and sense of identity required by this notion (Strike, 1991). In its pure form, this view does not allow individuals such as these homeschoolers to choose their own "good" or to use their choices to form who they will become. As such, Americans, who generally hold to an ideal of freedom based upon individual autonomy, find this particular notion of community highly restrictive.

In spite of the desire on the part of these civic-minded homeschoolers to promote public schools that approach instruction, curriculum, and/or the teaching of values in ways seen by them as beneficial, not all Americans (indeed, not all civic-minded homeschoolers) share their visions, making their communitarian ideal highly problematic. Without sufficient commonalities, those who do not hold to dominant views often find their actions constrained and institutions imposing (Taylor, 1984). Developing a collective "self-understanding" and assuming a common background and consensus simply does not allow for substantial differences between people or groups (Habermas, 1996). It ranks the norm over forms of dissent and ranks homogeneity over diversity. Consequently, those who do

not share these same ideals would find a communitarian education to consist of propaganda and indoctrination. These practices demonstrate the "exclusionary and/or assimilationist tendencies" of the republican ideal (Baynes, 1992, p. 63). Perhaps most obviously, many parents with minority children argue convincingly that American schools often fail to take their interests and histories into account (see hooks, 1990; West, 1993). A growing number of parents, including some involved in my broader study, choose to homeschool for this very reason (also, see Aizenman, 2000; Llewellyn, 1996; Wahisi, 1995). Pluralism can create disharmony between individual aspirations and social institutions (see Strike, 1991).

Feelings of isolation can occur when people try to create commonality amongst difference, as might occur in a communitarian democracy. This ideal requires a degree of consensus not found in pluralistic societies.

The civic-minded homeschoolers I spoke with, who ironically represent those excluded from many societal norms, nonetheless embraced a form of communitarian vision. Although they found themselves outside mainstream beliefs and practices, they refused to give up on the public schools and they described a desire to see those schools reshaped around their own presently marginalized beliefs. These parents reasoned, in spite of their unhappiness with some aspects of public education, that the public schools provided a good and necessary service for our society – and that this service could, and should, be improved. So they pursued their Quixotic quest but also made the immediate decision to provide their own children with the education that they could not find in their schools. Of course, if any one of these parents does succeed in implementing his or her own communitarian vision, it will be at the expense of the many other parents with very different communitarian visions.

Conclusion

Just like these homeschoolers, many other Americans struggle with the schooling choices they make for their children. In taking advantage of public school choice, charter options, or vouchers, am I contributing to the educational stratification that I decry? Am I doing the same when I place my own child in a college-prep track? In sending my child to a private school rather than the poorly-funded and decrepit local public school, am I abandoning my commitment to public education? Do we, as American citizens, want our schools to indoctrinate children with any given set of beliefs and ideas? If not, what safeguards are reasonable or possible? Can I, in good conscience, send my child to a school

that – whether through its designed curriculum or its hidden curriculum – teaches values directly at odds with my own? Ultimately, if I do not take advantage of my options to make advantageous choices for my child, am I sacrificing his or her future at the alter of my own selfish consistency?

We live in an increasingly market-based educational system that demands of parents that they either make explicit choices or damn their own children to the remnants left behind by the choosers. As the American educational system enhances these choice options, it moves ever closer to the liberal ideal. But as seen in the struggles of the homeschoolers discussed in this article, that ideal presents powerful dilemmas for many parents – even those parents who otherwise seemed inclined toward embracing liberal democratic theory. These autonomy-minded homeschoolers as well as their civic-minded counterparts found that exercising educational options put their ideals for broader society into conflict with their practical, parental responsibility of making the best choices for their own children.

According to the free market theory of scholars such as Milton Friedman (Friedman & Friedman, 1972), the private decisions made by these parents, grounded in what was best for their own children, should drive a better educational system. The study reported in this article does not empirically address this contention. But the democratic tensions highlighted by the experiences of the homeschoolers I studied do raise concerns about the consistency of that brave new market-based educational system with American's broader democratic ideals.

Parents will always make individual choices that benefit themselves and their families. The question for policymakers is whether, or to what degree, the American educational system should be structured to place those choices at its functional core. Within a choice structure driven overwhelmingly by private parental decisions, Americans may find that the civic-mindedness of the communitarian ideal has been sacrificed.

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